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The PD
Art Wire

SHOWS SANTA OF COLUMBUS' TIME

Art Museum Has Oil of St. Nick by Venetian

What would Christmas mean without Santa Claus?

In France jolly St. Nick is called Pere Noel; in Holland, Sinter Klaas, and in Germany, Kris Kringle or Kristkindle, which once meant Christ Child.

But whatever he represents today is due to a flesh and blood man - the good Bishop Sankt Nikolas who lived in the Near East 1,630 years ago. He is patron saint of sailors and children.

Nickolas was the son of rich parents, who died and left him an orphan. He lived in Panthera in Lycia, in what is now Turkey.

As a young man he became a servant of God and devoted his life to helping the unfortunate as he gave all his wealth in charitable deeds toward aiding the poor and destitute.

Dates from Columbus

The Cleveland Museum of Art is exhibiting a panel painting of "St. Nicholas." The tooled gold ground oil was painted by Carlo Crivelli, who lived in Venice at the time Columbus discovered America.

According to folklore a few brash, stop-at-nothing 10th century patriots of the island city snatched the body of St. Mark, patron of the city, from its tomb in Alexandria, Egypt. In the legend the soul of the evangelist appeared in a tempest driving the Egyptians to shelter to give the bold Venetians a free run to their ships. While they were about it they brought along the body of St. Nicholas.

While on a voyage to the Holy Land, Nicholas miraculously saved the sinking ship in a terrible storm and restored life to a trio of sailors who had been washed overboard and whose bodies had been recovered. When he returned to Myra he was elected a church bishop.

Wears Red Vestments

To keep a poor nobleman and his three daughters from starvation three times he tied gold in a handkerchief and secretly during the night threw the gifts into a window. On another occasion he visited a Fagin-like inn keeper who had chopped up and pickled three

children in a tub of brine ready to be served. After making the sign of the cross over the barrel the trio rose up alive and whole.

The artist in the museum oil shows Nicholas dressed in red bishop's vestments carrying the crozier of his office and a book with three gold balls, his attributes.

In the Middle Ages the Germans dressed the jovial saint in red robes and his servant, Knight Rupert, gave gifts and presents to children.

Rides White Charger

Sinter Klaas in Holland rides on a white charger followed by a retainer from India. To this day in Amsterdam, the patron arrives by barge on the North Sea Canal before the St. Nicholas Church in front of the Central Rail Station. The children and sailors offer him bouquets of flowers, and he rides through the streets distributing gifts.

When the Dutch came to the New World they brought along their Christmas traditions, and in New Amsterdam, Harlem or Manhattan Island they observed the custom of St. Nick giving gifts on Holy Night. The Germans carried their yuletide practices to Cleveland, Cincinnati, Milwaukee and other cities.

Wears Same Fur Cap

Today the venerated Santa wears the same red fur cap, black boots and scarlet costume as he has for centuries. After Moore wrote "Twas the Night Before Christmas" a chimney, sleigh and the reindeer with the red-nosed Rudolph were added.

So on Christmas morning the rejoicing children of Cleveland find gifts left by the kind-hearted St. Nick, who lived so long, long ago.

His modern arrival by helicopter, while not as romantic, is a new twist to give speed to his vast Christmas Eve undertaking.

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